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ABSTRACT

A study of the decline in second language enrollments in Scotland's upper secondary schools is summarized. A survey conducted in 1998, sent to a random sample representing 25 percent of all secondary schools in the country, elicited administrator and language teacher opinions concerning factors influencing language enrollments. Some students were also invited to comment on their experiences of modern language learning and factors influencing their choice of courses. Data summarized here include: trends in the number of students taking advanced tests in the languages in 1976, 1986, and 1996; changes in the popularity of languages in relation to other top-enrollment subjects during that period; and the perceived contributions of public policy, school policy, school practice, and student attitudes to the enrollment decline. Potential for reversing the decline is considered, and specific recommendations are made. (MSE)

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# Interchange 59

## Foreign Languages in the Upper Secondary School: A Study of the Causes of Decline

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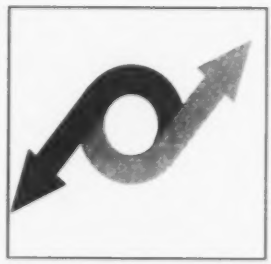

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# Foreign Languages in the Upper Secondary School: A Study of the Causes of Decline

**Joanna McPake (Scottish Council for Research in Education), Richard Johnstone (University of Stirling), Lesley Low (University of Stirling), Lindsay Lyall (Scottish Council for Research in Education)**

## Introduction

In November 1996, researchers at the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) and the Institute of Education at the University of Stirling began a study of the causes of decline in uptake of Higher courses in modern languages in Scottish secondary schools. The study was funded by The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID) in response to evidence from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) that the numbers of students entered for Higher examinations in modern languages had fallen by approximately 50 per cent between 1976 and 1996, and consequent widespread concern about the effects of declining capability in modern languages on Scottish industry and trade and on Scotland's role within Europe.

## Methodology

The findings from the research are based primarily on a survey conducted in the spring of 1998, sent to a randomly selected sample representing 25 per cent of all secondary schools in Scotland. Within each school, the headteacher and the principal teacher of modern languages were asked to give their views on a range of factors identified by the research team as having a potential bearing on the uptake of modern languages at Higher. From the same schools, a random 25 per cent sample of S4 and S5 students entered for Standard Grade examinations at Credit level in modern languages was also invited to comment on experiences of modern language learning and factors influencing choices of courses taken in S5.

Before conducting the survey, the researchers carried out a preliminary study in 12 case-study secondary schools. Students from S2 to S5 were interviewed by

the research team, as were principal teachers of modern languages, guidance staff, senior managers with responsibility for timetabling, and headteachers. Parents of children at the case-study schools were also interviewed by telephone.

The researchers also carried out a telephone survey of a range of Scottish businesses to gather information about the foreign language needs of different types of employer, and then interviewed nine business representatives in more detail, to seek views on the importance of language skills at the recruitment stage and subsequently.

The findings from these various sources are combined and summarised here. A full report on the findings from the study is available from the Scottish Council for Research in Education.

## How great is the decline in uptake of modern languages at Higher?

**The number of S5 students sitting Highers in modern languages has fallen by almost 50 per cent over the last 20 years.**

Is this the situation in your school?

What are the implications of this decline for Scottish business and for the mobility of the Scottish labour force within Europe?

Various figures have been used to illustrate the extent of the decline in uptake of modern languages at Higher. We look here at the question from two different perspectives. Firstly, we compare the number of presentations for Highers in modern languages in 1996 (the year the research began) with those for 1986 and 1976. Secondly, we look at the popularity of Highers in modern languages compared with other subjects, over the same period.

### Highers presentations in modern languages 1976 - 1996

The national picture relating to Highers in modern languages has changed markedly over the past 20 years. The number of S5 students sitting Higher Grade examinations in modern languages over this period has almost halved. In 1976, there were over 11,000 presentations at Higher in the five main modern languages, compared with just under 6,000 in 1996. This decline varied from one language to another and the rate of decline was less between 1986 and 1996 than between 1976 and 1986.

Although French is by far the most widely studied modern language at Higher, the decline has been steeper for this language, where numbers have fallen by over 50 per cent, than for the other languages (with the exception of Russian, which has almost disappeared). In contrast, numbers for Spanish have risen by around 50 per cent since 1976, although they are a very small proportion of the total number of language learners. Table 1 illustrates the pattern of uptake at Higher for the five main modern languages from 1976 to 1996.

The steepness of the decline at Higher can, to some extent, be explained by changes to the S5 population and to the nature of provision for students in S5 over the last 20 years. Many more students now stay on to S5 than was the case in 1976. To cater for this more diverse population of students, with a wider range

of needs, interests and abilities than before and living in a society which has changed dramatically during these 20 years, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has introduced a number of Higher courses in subjects which were not available in the 1970s (including computing and PE), and the greater spread of students across subjects may have reduced uptake for all 'established' subjects. In addition, many S5 students follow National Certificate modular courses rather than Highers.

However, even when these factors have been taken into consideration, the decline is still significant. One way of contextualising it is to compare the number of students taking Higher English over the last 20 years with those taking modern languages. English is the most widely studied subject at Higher and it is unlikely that many students sitting modern languages examinations do not also sit Higher English. In 1976, around 42 per cent of those who sat Higher English also sat a Higher in a modern language. In 1996, the proportion had fallen to around 26 per cent.

Table 1: S5 Higher candidates and related cohorts 1976 - 1996

| | 1976 | 1986 | 1996 |
|---|---|---|---|
| French | 8523 | 5838 | 3756 |
| German | 2272 | 1496 | 1640 |
| Spanish | 295 | 230 | 451 |
| Italian | 143 | 64 | 106 |
| Russian | 80 | 39 | 13 |
| All five languages | 11313 | 7667 | 5966 |
| English | 25629 | 26992 | 23009 |
| Number presented for at least one Higher in S5 | 28960 | 32796 | 33070 |
| Relevant S4 cohort | 90300 | 82869 | 64432 |
| Number of S4 cohort staying on after Christmas in S5 | 32958 | 38969 | 42680 |

Notes:

1. Presentation data derived from SQA annual statistical reports
2. Cohort information derived from SOEID School Census and School Leaver returns

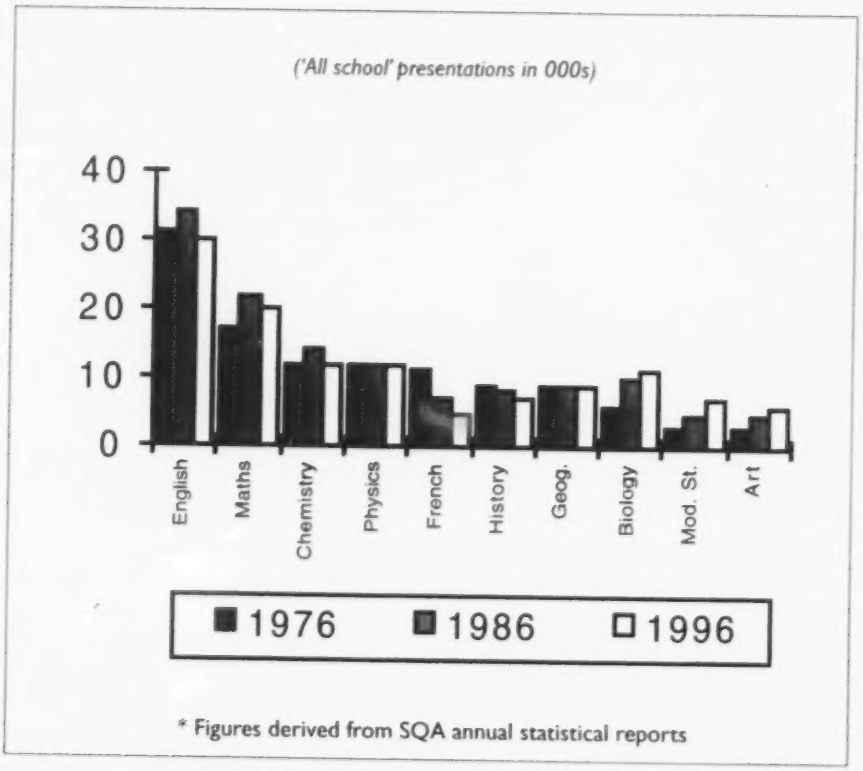
**French, the most widely studied modern language, slipped from fifth to tenth place in terms of popularity between 1976 and 1996.**

What do you think is the appropriate ranking for French?

## The popularity of Highers subjects 1976 - 1996

Modern languages have lost ground in terms of their popularity in 1976. Then, French was the fifth most popular subject. By 1996, it had fallen to tenth, overtaken by biology, modern studies, history, geography and art & design. New subjects – such as computing and PE – are close behind. The last two decades have therefore seen the rise of the sciences (particularly biology) and of the social sciences, and increasing popularity for subjects with an evident 'professional' slant, at the expense of languages. This is the picture shown in Figure A.

Figure A: Changes in popularity of top ten Highers subjects 1976 – 1996*




* Figures derived from SQA annual statistical reports

**Educational professionals and others with an interest in promoting the study of modern languages have produced a very wide range of explanations for the decline in uptake, including the effects both of national structures and policies and of schools' own policies and practices, as well as low student motivation.**

What are the implications of the existence of so many different views, held with conviction by so many people?

## Why has uptake declined?

The aim of our research was to identify the reasons for the decline in uptake of modern languages at Higher, from the perspectives of students themselves, modern languages teachers, senior managers in secondary schools and the wider community (e.g. parents and business representatives). We quickly found that everyone we talked to had strong ideas about the causes of the decline, but that there were many different explanations. We grouped these into three categories:

- explanations relating to the national structure and policies for language learning in Scotland (including, for example, the impact of national initiatives such as *Modern Languages in the Primary School, 5–14* or *Languages for All*, and the demands made by Standard and Higher Grade examinations)
- explanations relating to school policies and practice (including timetabling and guidance issues, teaching methods and course content)
- explanations relating to students' attitudes and motivation for learning modern languages (including their experiences of language learning, their interest in other countries and other cultures, their perception of the importance of competence in a foreign language for gaining entry to higher education or employment and their expectations of themselves as language learners).

When your school carries out self-evaluation, do you ask for pupils' views on foreign languages?

We explored the large number of different explanations in detail in the course of our research. However, it is important to remember that our principal task was to discover why students – particularly those entered for Standard Grade at Credit level, and therefore best placed to continue the modern language(s) they had been studying up to the end of S4 – chose not to do so. The other issues relating to the teaching of modern languages throughout secondary (and in some cases in primary too) raised in the course of the research were relevant only if they could be seen to have an influence on students' choices of Higher course. Here, we look briefly at our findings in relation to each of the three categories, and then report on the two key factors we identified as influencing students' decisions.

## The impact of national structure and policies for language learning on students' Highers choices

**Teachers, pupils and parents have different perspectives on the impact of features of the national structure for modern languages (such as progression from Standard Grade to Higher) on student choices.**

How might opportunities for sharing information, expectations and ideas be created?

Many principal teachers (supported, in most cases, by headteachers) believe that problems of progression from Standard Grade to Higher (the former perceived as an examination which focuses on oral communication, the latter on reading, writing and grammatical competence) have had a negative influence on students' choices at S4. Modern languages teachers feel that it is particularly difficult to do well at Higher in modern languages (although this perception was not borne out by our research) and that students are discouraged at the prospect. Furthermore, many principal teachers feel that *Languages for All*, which has made it compulsory for most, if not all, secondary students to continue studying a modern language until the end of S4, has had a demotivating effect on able students. However, students and their parents were less aware of, and less concerned about the effects of *Languages for All* or the relationship of Standard Grade to Higher than had been anticipated. They rarely raised such issues in the context of choices of Higher courses. Indeed, parents tended not to be aware that the numbers being presented for Higher in a modern language were in a state of decline. When they learnt that this was so, they felt that this was a situation to be deplored.

To some extent, these differences may be attributed to differences of perspective. Teachers are in a better position to see long-term changes and global effects, students and parents the immediate context. What our evidence strongly sug-

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gests is that teachers and students are not sufficiently aware of how the other party perceives the situation.

## The impact of school policy and practice on students' Highers choices

A wide range of explanations relating to policies and practice within schools was put forward to account for the low uptake of modern languages at Higher. These included:

- critical views on teaching and learning methods in use in schools, particularly in S3 and S4
- restrictions on uptake of modern languages at S2 and S4 resulting from school options and choices systems, and also from restrictions commonly operated by modern languages departments themselves, to ensure that only able students continue modern language study to Higher level
- lack of promotion of modern languages from modern languages departments, from guidance staff or, more generally, from the school 'ethos'.

We found that students are critical of certain aspects of the S3/4 curriculum. In particular, they dislike grammar and rote learning, and the 'self-oriented' curriculum (where they are frequently asked to talk in public about themselves in another language). Other issues relating to teaching and learning (e.g. teaching methods, resources, mixed ability or streamed teaching) were rarely raised in their explanations for their choices of Higher course.

**Students choose their S5 courses at least partly on the basis of information provided by the school about their value in helping students to meet future education or career goals.**

How might the modern languages departments, careers and guidance staff and senior secondary school management collaborate in the promotion of modern languages Highers as valuable qualifications?

We also found that, in some schools, certain restrictions on Higher course choices were counteracting each other: if able students were forced to choose between a science and a language, the science was thought to be the more obvious option. If, at the same time, the modern languages department was restricting Higher courses in modern languages to the most able students, they could find themselves in a situation where few students were able to opt for a language.

There was considerable evidence that modern languages are not 'marketed' effectively either by modern languages departments themselves, or, more generally, within schools. Students and their parents commented that the case for continuing to study a modern language to Higher needs to be made, if students are to see this as relevant to their future education or career plans.

### What effects do students' attitudes to, and motivation for, learning modern languages have on their Highers choices?

It is clear that student motivation for continuing to study a modern language to Higher level is not high, given the low numbers who take the opportunity to do so. The research explored four possible explanations for this in the case of students taking Credit-level examinations in a modern language at Standard Grade:



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- students' experiences of language learning are not intrinsically rewarding
- students are not interested in other languages and cultures
- students see no material gain for themselves in learning another language
- the expectations students have of themselves as language learners are not met and their confidence in their linguistic ability is not high.

We found that these Credit-level students' experiences of language learning, particularly in S3 and S4, are not, in many cases, intrinsically rewarding, for a variety of reasons, which included a perceived absence of cultural content in the curriculum, and a deep dislike of rote learning coupled with a lack of intellectual stimulus.

Does your school aim to explore the cultures of other countries? If so how well are language courses tailored to this?

Students profess to be very interested in other languages and cultures, and, as noted above, would like greater emphasis on cultural matters in the curriculum. Their opportunities to find out about the cultures of the countries whose languages they are studying or to make contact with speakers of those languages independently of the school are limited by a failure to develop the skills which would give them access to material available to them in Scotland, such as music, films or videos, magazines or web sites.

Students see long-term benefits of learning a foreign language, but, crucially, a substantial number do not perceive that languages can advance their immediate goals of gaining entry to higher education or to the career of their choice.

**Many of the students in our study (all of whom were entered for Credit level at Standard Grade in modern languages) believed they had achieved little at the end of the compulsory years of language study, and lacked confidence in their ability to communicate with native speakers of the language they had studied.**

What are students entitled to expect by the end of four to six years of modern language study, and how can this entitlement best be communicated to them?

We found that students and others lack clear expectations of what they should have achieved at the end of four years of language study, and that implicit expectations may be unrealistically high. As a consequence, Credit-level students are not confident about their ability to communicate with native speakers and are frustrated by their apparent lack of achievement.

In our view, the key factors influencing students' decisions about the subjects they wish to study at Higher relate to motivation. Most students choose the subjects they wish to study to Higher level on the basis of whether – in their view – such qualifications will help them meet their goals of entry into higher education or into employment. The majority did not see a modern language Higher as a particularly relevant qualification in terms of achieving these goals, although they valued foreign language skills for other reasons (opportunities to travel, to make contact with people from other countries and to learn more about other cultures and points of view). While they were critical of certain aspects of the modern languages course up to S4, we felt that these concerns (which might well apply to other subjects too) would not have prevented them from taking Highers in modern languages if they perceived sound education- or career-related reasons for gaining such qualifications.

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## Climate of negativity

**There is a 'climate of negativity' surrounding debate about the current position of modern languages in Scottish education.**

How can we break through this barrier in order to assess realistically our strengths and weaknesses in this area, and thus set appropriate, realisable goals?

We were concerned that a number of factors came together to create a climate of negativity that may prove difficult to dispel. Among these, we noted that:

- even students who did well at Standard Grade did not necessarily value the achievement (and therefore were unlikely to want to continue with the subject); this points to a perceived difference between gaining a good grade in a national examination (which they did achieve) and actually being able to use their foreign language for purposes they valued, such as interaction with their continental peers (which they felt they were not able to do)
- only the most able students felt they had received encouragement to develop their modern language competence beyond Standard Grade
- there was a general awareness that at Standard Grade a modern language was a comparatively difficult subject, particularly in terms of gaining a high grade in Credit writing, but generally little awareness that at Higher, students of modern languages did as well, if not better than those sitting examinations in 'competitor' subjects
- headteachers and principal teachers reported that they had already undertaken many measures to reverse the trend of declining numbers, without great success
- among principal teachers, there has been a 37 per cent swing away from support for *Languages for All*
- employers sought native speakers for jobs requiring foreign language skills, on the basis that the required level of skill is not available in Scotland, and did not therefore seek to recruit students with Highers in modern languages.

**In Scottish society generally, awareness of the value of being able to communicate in other languages, whether as a means of promoting trade or enhancing personal career prospects is not high.**

What would Scotland gain by increasing the number of competent linguists in the adult population?

How might awareness of the potential benefits be raised?

## Is it possible to reverse the decline?

Given the Ministerial commitment to reversing the trend of decline, how might more students be persuaded to take Highers in modern languages? The principal objective must be to improve student motivation for learning languages. This means, firstly, making clearer than before the importance of being able to communicate in another language for business and for wider social and cultural reasons. If students are ill-informed in this regard, this is the responsibility not only of the students themselves but also of modern languages departments, of guidance staff, and of higher education and employment recruitment literature. In general terms, Scots do not have a highly developed awareness of the importance of communicating in several languages in an international context and of the potential for business and for employment of developing these capabilities. More detailed exploration of the value of foreign language skills in these areas is needed, and wider dissemination of the available information. Our recommendations include that:

- consideration be given to enhancing work-related elements within the S3 and S4 courses, ranging from a greater emphasis on role playing in various 'professional' contexts within the modern language class to developing linked courses with 'professional' subjects such as business studies, computing, technology etc.

- modern languages departments become more actively involved in the promotion of their own subject, to counter 'competition' from other subjects, focusing on the potential of languages to support and enhance study in a variety of areas in Higher Education, or in career development
- guidance teachers' attention is drawn to changing patterns of modern language teaching in higher education, where languages are increasingly linked to 'professional' subjects such as business studies, accountancy, law etc. and where extensive opportunities for study and work experience in Europe are now available
- guidance teachers are encouraged to see the world of work within Europe rather than just within Scotland as their remit and to consider the value of competence in foreign languages and associated cultural knowledge in the context of labour mobility across Europe
- modern languages teachers and guidance staff ensure that they are well informed of the opportunities for using languages for study or work experience abroad, in the context both of higher education and of careers of interest to school students, and that they pass this information on to students
- 'role models' (adults who use languages in the course of their work or in post-school education) are sought at local and national level to encourage students to become aware of the long-term value of achieving and maintaining competence in a foreign language
- bodies with an interest in promoting labour mobility within Europe encourage higher education institutions and employers' organisations to publicise opportunities for study and work abroad in their recruitment literature, pointing out the value of competence in a foreign language for those considering taking them up.

Furthermore, a more positive attitude towards what students achieve at school is needed. At the same time, what they achieve must serve purposes to which students attach real value. While a large proportion of S4 students are likely to continue to choose Highers courses in subjects other than modern languages, because of perceptions that other subjects are of more immediate relevance, our research suggests that they may come to recognise the value of a foreign language at a later stage, when the possibilities of working or travelling abroad become more real to them. However, if even students judged by their teachers to be competent linguists (i.e. those entered for Credit level at Standard Grade) recall their time in the modern language class as tedious, frustrating and ultimately pointless (because, at the end of the course they had not acquired the ability to communicate with foreigners with some degree of fluency, as they had hoped) they may well fail to take up subsequent opportunities to learn a foreign language because of a lack of confidence in their own abilities.

More positive views of students' achievements are likely to develop if we are realistic about what can be achieved with our current level of resources. At present, language study at school is compulsory for four to six years. (The earliest point at which students begin to learn a foreign language currently is generally P6, the latest S1; ultimately, when the initiative to start modern language learning in the primary school has been fully implemented, most, if not all, students will study a language for six years.) This equates to approximately 400 hours of compulsory language learning. What is it feasible for students to have achieved at the end of this time? How do students' achievements currently compare with those of their counterparts in other European countries after a similar amount of time learning a foreign language? To what extent are students, their parents, and their future employers informed about what is expected?

In this context we have recommended that:

- national bodies develop a coherent framework for the six-year course, to support continuity and progression from P6 to S4, as students move on from *5–14* to preparation for Standard Grade
- in recognition of the fact that S4 will continue to represent the end of modern languages study for most students, national bodies need to establish clear and realistic expectations of what students should be able to do with the language(s) they have studied, given the time and the resources available; a useful starting point for this process might be the Council of Europe *Frameworks* document which identifies levels of competence in foreign languages and the amount of time needed to acquire them
- these expectations are widely publicised so that students, parents and others with an interest in promoting modern languages in Scotland have a clear idea of the value – and the limitations – of a Standard Grade qualification; in our view, publicising these expectations could stimulate debate about appropriate standards of linguistic competence, make clear that the acquisition of language skills is cumulative, and establish more clearly the benefits of continuing language learning for one more year, to Higher grade (particularly if a separate set of expectations of attainment were established, showing the differences in outcome between Standard Grade and Higher)
- if, in the debate around the establishment of these expectations, it emerges that aspects of the current Standard Grade examination are not entirely consonant, changes may need to be made to the examination, bearing in mind that it represents, for most students an 'end point' to their modern language studies.

## Final report

The full report, *Foreign Languages in the Upper Secondary School: A Study of the Causes of Decline*, is available from the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE), 15 St John Street, Edinburgh, EH8 8JR (Tel: 0131-557 2944).

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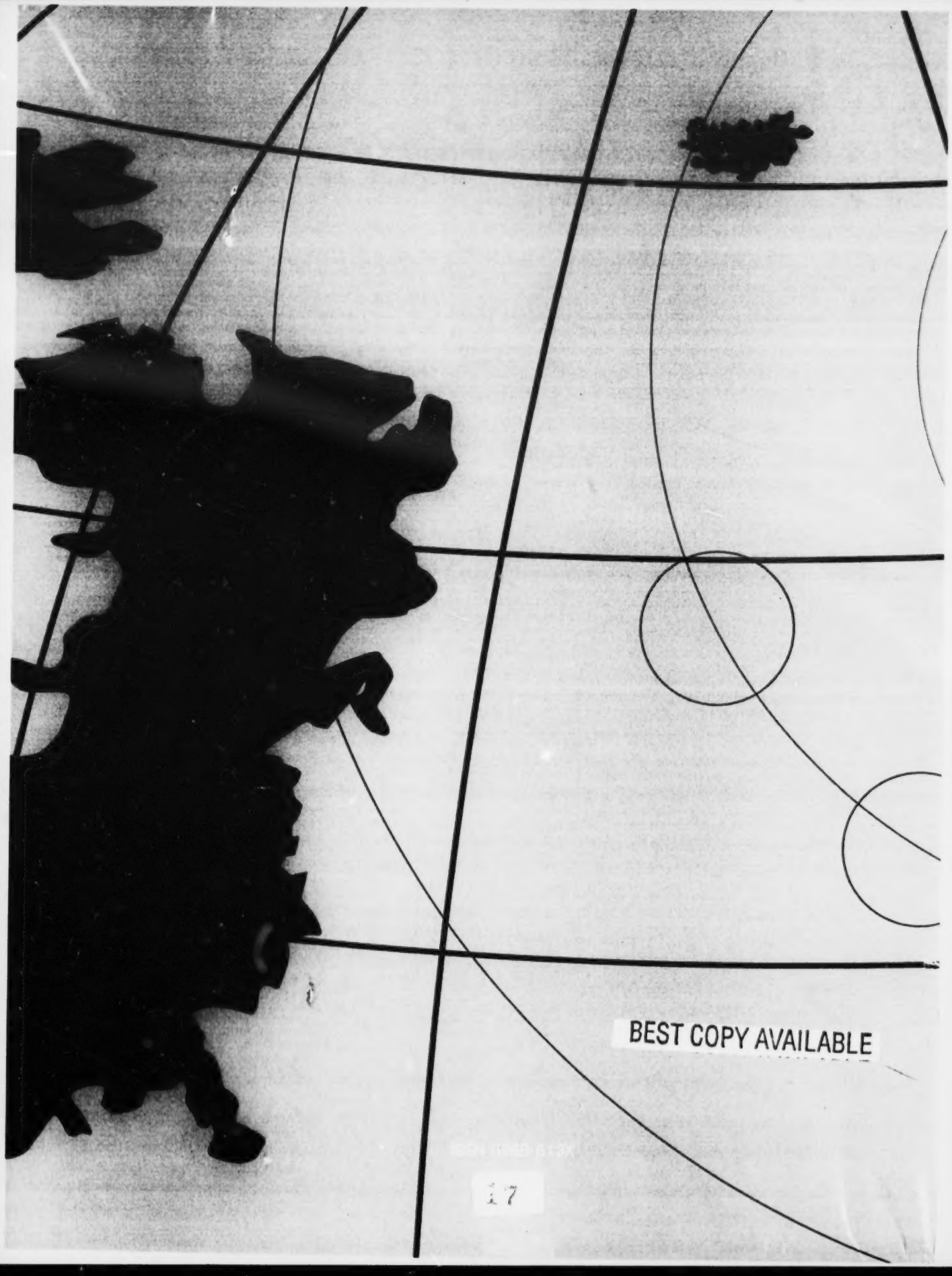

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